

# CHAPTER 10

## A PROPHETIC VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

### Church, Political Engagement, and Public Theology

*Agnes Chiu*

#### INTRODUCTION

What role should the church<sup>1</sup> have in its respective historical context in witnessing the Christian faith? When faced with diverse cultural and political challenges, how can the church continue with the bold proclamation of the Gospel? Public theology provides a viable platform for this engagement. Public theology ties theology to its context in which the church situates itself and examines theology's relevance to current social issues. Ecclesiology and public theology go together.

This chapter explores the biblical role of the church in doing public theology, its duty to provide the moral vision for society and the state, and its role as a new family sphere – a home for new relationships among believers, particularly in its engagement with the state. In practicing public theology, the church needs to maintain an openness to pluralistic views, be willing to be scrutinized, and take advantage of shared values as the common language to conduct dialogue. To provide concrete examples of public theology and political engagement, the chapter will survey two case studies: (1) Korea's democratization process and (2) the Iraq War. It examines the church's engagement in the government's policy and decisions in both cases. Finally, the chapter posits a pragmatic approach to prepare and assist the church in engaging the political government of its local area using the tools of communication technology and social media platforms to share the needed vision of God's values.

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1. The term "church" used in this chapter refers to the Christian body and Christian churches collectively. It does not signify an organization or denomination.

Theology is public and should apply to more than a defined community. One of theology's tasks is to mediate in public practice, using reason, to discover the truth for the contribution to the broader society's good.<sup>2</sup> Public theology helps the church relate to society at large. This duty to relate is not only an aspect of the divine mandate to cultivate and keep God's creation order, but is critical to keep the Christian faith relevant in a culture of secularization. To prosper, people and government, regardless of their faith orientation, need God's moral vision. Where and how do people and governments seek this moral vision? The church is the channel.

### THE THEOLOGICAL BASIS OF PUBLIC THEOLOGY

Abraham Kuyper was a nineteenth century Dutch theologian, journalist, educator, and politician. In a famous speech, *The Social Question*, delivered in 1891 at the First Christian Social Congress in Holland, Kuyper opened with a provocative and convicting question: What should we, as confessors of Christ, do about the social needs of our time?<sup>3</sup> Kuyper vehemently argued for an affirmative duty of Christians to respond to the social needs of their time. Their identity as "confessors of Christ" demands no less.

This mandate to respond to social needs has a biblical foundation. When God created humans, God gave a task to Adam before the fall: to cultivate and keep the land. "Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." (Gen 2:15, emphasis added) The word, "work" is also translated as "cultivate," and in Hebrews is עָבַד (*abad*) and means to work and to serve, to the point that humans are to be "slaves" or under a bond to work.<sup>4</sup> The covenantal nature of work is to endure all circumstances and cultivate the land to production. The word, "keep," שָׁמַר (*shamar*) means to keep, watch, and preserve. God enables the land to become productive, and humans are obligated to maintain and protect it carefully. This ongoing duty to keep the creation order is the "cultural mandate" given to humans.

### The Cultural Mandate: A Public Faith and Public Theology

This cultural mandate features several characteristics. First, as this mandate is a command from God, humans must fulfill this responsibility to cultivate. Second, the work mandate is a covenant requiring a lifetime of devotion. Even after the fall, the duty to cultivate continues. Yet sin changed the nature of work into toil as God said that "through painful toil, you will eat of it all the days of your life" (Gen 3:17). Third, it takes effort to cultivate and keep the environment. The task is not easy and takes effort. Finally, the object of this mandate is the garden or the public domain of God's creation. Humans are to be concerned for not just their internal spiritual being, but also the needs of the society at large. This task is to benefit God's creation, including humans, and maintain God's creation order. In short, God desires humans to work. It is a lifetime of satisfaction amid toil. It takes effort. And the final beneficiary is God's creation order.

This cultural mandate forms the biblical foundation for public theology. The term, public theology, was coined by Martin Marty in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Marty defines public theology as "an effort to interpret the life of a people in the light of a transcendent reference."<sup>6</sup> Engaging in public theology is the effort to relate one's private faith to the public order.<sup>7</sup> Thus, public theology involves the definition of the public sphere. What are the public issues in which we need to be involved? What are the private matters from which we need to be protected? The exact meanings of public spheres are not specific. Sebastian Kim, a scholar of public theology and editor of the *International Journal of Public Theology*, defines the public sphere in six major bodies: state, media, religious communities, academics, civil society, and market.<sup>8</sup> Each body has its sub-groups. These six bodies represent the different natures of the public sphere and the contexts in which public theology can engage. Doing public theology is an effort to engage theology in dialogue with these bodies. Take the state body as an example; this body deals with politics, policymaking, governments, judiciary, and legislatures that impact society. Public theology that engages the state body would dialogue on the issues involving the above aspects. Indeed, these bodies do not stand alone by themselves but inter-relate

2. Sebastian Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere* (London: SCM Press, 2011), 26.

3. Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*. Translated by James W. Skillen (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2011), 13.

4. God gave the work mandate before the fall. Work is thus a calling, not slavery. Nevertheless, the Hebrew word עָבַד (*abad*) was used repeatedly in the context of slavery in the Old Testament. Ironically, God foresaw the fall and the punishment he subsequently rendered to man.

5. Martin Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience," *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 4 October (1974).

6. Martin Marty, *Public Church: Mainline-Evangelical-Catholic* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 9–11.

7. Marty, 9.

8. Kim, *Public Sphere*, 12–13.

to each other. For example, in non-democratic countries, the state controls the other bodies, such as the media and economy.<sup>9</sup> Doing public theology would require engagement in multiple discourses with different issues and seek to understand the relationships among the different bodies.

### The Role of the Church in Doing Public Theology

While we affirm the role of individual Christians in doing public theology, what is the role of the church? The first time the word, "church," appears in the New Testament is in Matthew 16:18, when Jesus said to Peter, "on this rock I will build my church." The Greek word for church, ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*), means an assembly or congregation. The word does not limit the church to an established organization or a building. Instead, it refers to a group of believers. Similarly, the book of Acts uses the term to describe the group of believers at that time. For example, the text says that fear descended upon the church and speaks of persecution against the church, referring to believers (Acts 5:11; 8:1). Saul ravaged the church, which again means the group of believers (Acts 8:3). There was no "registration" of the church group. As Paul, the converted Saul explicated the cultural mandate for all Christians in the book of Romans. He urged the believers to "live at peace with everyone" and to "overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:18, 21). Believers are the "salt" and "light" of the world as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 6. With this understanding, the cultural mandate that God gave to Adam, representing humans, is also applicable to the collective body of believers in the form of a church.

The church, as a collective body of believers, has a unique advantage. Together, Christians encourage one another and build one another up (1 Thess 5:11). Hebrews 10:24–25 thus urges believers to "consider how to spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together . . . but let us encourage one another. . . ." This is an echo of the principle taught in Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 that "two are better than one because they have a good return for their work. If one falls down, his friend can help him up." In the good works of caring for the social needs, the church, as a collective body, can build up the Christian body and encourage each other to continue with the effort. In the effectiveness of good work, the church becomes a healthier body, a catalyst for the permeation of gospel value into society.<sup>10</sup>

In this unique role, the church can not only be fruitful, but can also reflect God's values. It points out the biblical values that can speak to society. It welcomes and invites dialogue with non-believers. The church can engage in open discourse with the non-believing world to seek the common goal of public good. Contrary to the worry of some, when the church maintains its core Christian values and belief, it does not lose its Christian identity. Instead, as Sebastian Kim points out, public theology extends Christian concerns for human well-being, justice, and community life into the wider public sphere.<sup>11</sup> This open communal dialogue engages the church on public issues. Dialogues draw the broader community of non-believers to understand how Christianity is relevant to social concerns.

### The Church's Duty to Provide Moral Vision

The church takes up the priestly function in modern culture. The Apostle Paul refers to rulers and the governing authorities as ministers and servants ordained by God (Rom 13:1, 3–4, 6). The state is obligated to uphold justice and avenge evil. In assisting the state to fulfill this function, the church, as God's representative, performs a priestly function by conveying God's message and vision. Unfortunately, some countries do not always seek to advance the freedom of the people they govern. Religious freedom and personal freedom could be restricted. The World Council of Churches, after its conference in 1948, stated the criteria of a responsible society:

A modern society can be a responsible society if "people have the freedom to control, to criticize, and to change their governments" and the power is distributed "as widely as possible through the whole community."<sup>12</sup>

When society goes astray, the church bears the responsibility to bring back the moral vision it needs. Without moral vision, the government and its people will conduct themselves according to their fleshly desires. The recognition and fulfillment of such responsibility upon the church is the critical first step to do public theology, especially when society is in unrest and turmoil.

9. Kim, *Public Sphere*, 12.

10. Kim, 230.

11. Kim, 231.

12. Odair Pedrosa Mateus, *World Council of Churches, WCC70 Amsterdam 1948 (4): Covenanting in Study: Communism, Capitalism, and the Responsible Society*. September 4, 2018. <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc70-amsterdam-1948-4-covenanting-in-study-communism-capitalism-and-the-responsible-society>. Accessed August 14, 2020.

In his book, *Asian Public Theology*, Felix Wilfred, a liberation theologian, points out three concerns that the church needs to address to live out the faith: political freedom, freedom from economic oppression, and creation of a harmonious and non-exclusive community.<sup>13</sup> The church needs to join people in their struggles for justice and freedom, rather than limiting its functions to the traditional ecclesiological framework and traditions. Wilfred, using the context of India, connects conversions to the rejection of social-economic discrimination. This recognition of discrimination is particularly crucial for Asian cultures because the cultural content favors a hierarchical structure that is prone to exploitation. The church pays attention to the cultural context and needs to relate theology to the cultural challenge.

When a government does not allow criticism or abuses its power to control its people's freedoms, the church is obligated to voice concern and participate in freedom struggles. One example of this courage in speaking up is the church in India. India has a rigid and discriminating caste system. It originated in the Hindu law as early as 1000 BC and divided people into distinct categories; within this system a segment of the entire population is banned and restricted from full social participation based solely on family origins. Although India abolished the caste system in 1950 in the Independence Constitution, the practice lives on. The church can provide governments and people with the moral vision needed to understand the injustice associated with the caste system. However, the church in India, has historically enjoyed a privileged status due to its connection with the ruling class during India's colonial past. The church needs to connect with and show compassion to the oppressed, and especially needs to engage with the oppressed in their fight for freedom. Wilfred, in another article, *Action Groups and the Struggle for Justice in India: Ecclesiological Implications*, explains the Christian involvement in these struggles. Individual Christians in India began to form action groups to fight for freedoms and succeeded in the fight. However, they also conflicted with the established church's leadership, which considered activism as being outside the traditional church business framework. Wilfred points out that the church must reflect on the political and cultural context in which it exists and witness

to society universally.<sup>14</sup> If the people suffer, the church is obligated to respond. If the government fails its people, the church must cry out.

The action groups in India also align themselves with other religious communities to form alliances to fight for freedoms. According to Wilfred, this type of inter-religious communion is a kind of "kingdom-community" and a part of God's plan.<sup>15</sup> Traditional church leadership does not accept this type of community and activism, nor do they regard it as a type of the traditional church practices. However, this activism effort is crucial to keep the church relevant to people, especially in the plights of people's suffering. Mission and theology do not exist in a vacuum but are lived out in real lives. The Asian cultural context calls for the church's intervention for good governance and the pursuit of society's common good. This responsibility is the essence of public theology.

### The Church as a New Family Sphere

In his book, *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity*, Alexander Chow explores the significance of the church as a public body in twenty-first century China. In Chinese tradition, the family unit is vital. The Cultural Revolution in the 1960s when children were encouraged to report on their parents severely marred this tradition. The subsequent One Child Policy in the 1980s eradicated the extended family structure. Finally, the ill effects of globalization separating parents and children broke down the nuclear family unit in modern Chinese society.

Chow argues that the church has taken the place of the traditional family as a new surrogate family.<sup>16</sup> This interpretation of the church's surrogate function may be valid for those who migrate to other cities for education and work, and who treat the church as their new family. The church provides support to individuals with the pastors as the patriarchs. The church also replaces the family to engage in key functions such as charity work. Chow attributes such involvement to the Confucian imagination of "inward sageliness, outward kingliness" (*nei sheng wai wang*). This phrase originates from the Daoist text, *Zhuangzi*. It refers to the unfortunate reality of those who seek to change the world (outward kingliness), but inevitably forget the true beauty of Heaven

13. Felix Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times*. Delhi: Allianz Enterprise, 2010), xi-xiv.

14. Felix Wilfred, "Action Groups and the Struggle for Justice in India: Ecclesiological Implications." *The Ecumenical Review* 39.3 (2010): 303.

15. Wilfred, 306.

16. Alexander Chow, *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 150.



and Earth ("inward sageliness"). Internal transformation must take place before the transformation of the world.<sup>17</sup>

Chow also utilizes an ancient Confucian concept of "managing the world" (*jing shi*). Contemporary Confucian scholar, Tu Wei-Ming, prominently uses the *jing shi* concept as a bridge to connect public theology with the Chinese Confucian culture as the foundation for public theology. The Confucian concept of managing the world is analogous to Christians' obligation to engage theology with public issues. Chow's usage of Confucianism and the churches' role in arguing for public theology might be too optimistic. The restrictions placed on the church, both the government churches and the underground family churches, limit a wide scale of social involvement. Nevertheless, the church, especially the underground family churches, is a tight niche supportive community and has proven to be a strong network for support. Chow also observes that some of the urban churches embrace the cultural mandate, which includes understanding the church as a non-governmental organization that can engage in the Chinese civil society.<sup>18</sup> Churches begin to engage in charitable activities, whether officially or unofficially, addressing social needs. This engagement is indeed a positive development among the Chinese churches in mainland China. Christians in China form circles around their fields such as universities and workplaces, and these circles become the new "reorientation" of familiar structures.<sup>19</sup> They collectively developed various media such as the academic field of Sino-Christian theology and several academic periodicals to speak into the Chinese public space. The church plays a crucial role in the study and methods of doing public theology.

However, the challenges of doing public theology in China remain strong. In his article on public theology in China, Xie Zhibin, a professor at Tongji University, Shanghai, cited other theologians such as Qingbao Zeng and reiterated the importance of the church in public theology. "The serving as a witness to God, a real public theology can be solely produced by the church," Xie quoted Qingbao Zeng.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the church bears the task of bearing witness to the public domain. However, the church is under many restrictions and much pressure, Xie reasoned. In contemporary Chinese context, the state penetrates or influences the religious sphere. One of the challenges of doing

public theology in China, as Xie observed, lies in the limited public social space apart from the government and the relatively unclear identity of the religious organizations engaging in charitable activities.<sup>21</sup> Yet these challenges are not surprising. In the case study of South Korea which will be addressed later, the church remained strong and courageous. Despite these obvious challenges, the church in China continues to flourish and enables the development of public theology in China.

### PRACTICING PUBLIC THEOLOGY

Public theology involves the church engaging in discourses on social issues. The ability to carry this discourse is crucial for the church to remain relevant to Christian social witnessing. Several essential pointers would be helpful in practicing public theology.

#### Openness to Pluralism

The church must be ready to receive and be open to criticism from within the church body and outside. Discourses with a broad spectrum of groups and people navigate among differences in opinion. Disagreement is inevitable. The temptation is to keep silent to avoid confrontation and disagreement. Yet, the result can be devastating. Uniformity in opinions is not necessarily a sign of unity for the church. Instead of viewing differences in opinion negatively, the church can view this pluralism as a complementary check and balance, and a means to keep it humble. The church speaks up, teaches the Lord's expectations, and calls out injustice. At the same time, the church remains humble to consider all opposing views. The church submissively seeks God's vision, and then faithfully delivers the message in boldness.

#### Openness to Scrutiny

The church, naturally, is under strict scrutiny in its actions as a witness for God, as the community observes whether they are consistent with what the church preaches or believes. The church must be genuine in its actions and beliefs. Individual believers are also judged by their actions. This openness to critical scrutiny helps the church to remain genuine and faithful.<sup>22</sup> Regrettably, there have been too many incidents in which the church has lost its ability to be a trusted witness. The child abuse scandals of the Catholic Church and

17. Chow, 150.

18. Chow, 150.

19. Chow, 149.

20. Zhibin Xie, "Why Public and Theological? The Problem of Public Theology in the Chinese Context," *International Journal of Public Theology* 2 (2017): 392–93.

21. Xie, "Why Public and Theological," 395–98.

22. Kim, *Public Sphere*, 232.

the Boy Scouts organization are just the tips of an iceberg. When the church has the priestly role to deliver God's message, the church must be ready to be scrutinized.

### Common Language

In discussing social issues, participants might not share the same Christian faith. Non-believing participants might not submit to the authority of the Bible. While Christians should stand firm in their religious beliefs and convictions, the methodology in engaging open discourses should utilize humans' shared values. Indeed, when God created humans, they were given a special place in the creation order. There are unique values common to all, regardless of religious convictions. Christians should be conversant in this language of shared values. By holding firm to one's Christian belief without wavering, one would not be compromising on the Christian conviction. By speaking in a language that others can understand, one can achieve the goal of doing public theology – engaging others to view the different social issues with theology.

God has instilled the spirit of conscience and a sense of humanity's common good. This common good concept is also common in Catholic teaching, particularly in the modern encyclical teachings of Pope John Paul II. Similarly, Protestant Christians also utilize this concept of common good to promote social dialogue and public theology. Sebastian Kim encourages churches to utilize the common good objectives and useful public insights as resources for the discourses.<sup>23</sup> This openness to other insights does not diminish Christian values. Instead, it is a recognition of God's sovereignty over all realms and the creation order. This openness begins a discussion that can embrace Christian and biblical authorities.

### TWO CASE STUDIES

How should the church react to injustice and thus engage the government in combating the injustice? Two cases, one from South Korea and one from the West, help us understand and appreciate churches' government engagement.

#### Korea – the Church's Role in the Democratization Process

Churches in South Korea have been through various stages of theological development since the 1950s. After the Second World War, the theology of *kibock sinang* or "faith for seeking blessings" to deliver them from poverty gained

ground in South Korea. With the backdrop of economic growth that began in the 1950s and 1960s, economic injustice and industrial abuse incidents were common. At the same time, church membership grew and mega-churches emerged.<sup>24</sup> The church generally interpreted material rewards such as wealth and healing as God's spiritual blessings.<sup>25</sup> The church in South Korea and their pastors simply accepted injustice as a necessary part of the economic development that the country enjoyed.

As the economy grew, so did the level of social injustice associated with industrialization. The incident where a sewing factory worker named Jun Tae-Il set himself on fire to protest workplace abuse awoke the South Korean churches. Christian leaders were shaken by this and began to align themselves with the poor. The Minjung Movement began. Minjung means "people," and Minjung theology represented the ideology of standing with the people. The church felt the need to respond to the needs of the poor. Christian leaders in South Korea realized the structural and systematic injustice that caused the urban poverty problem. The *Korean Christian Manifesto* was authored in 1973; it identified those who oppressed people as having "evil power," and declared that Jesus the Messiah would one day destroy them. Two years later, another well-known Minjung theologian named Suh Nam-Dong, argued that the liberation of the poor involves communal and political changes.<sup>26</sup> This call for social justice caused a paradigm shift – from merely caring for the poor to making concrete changes with a particular political vision.

Another important political backdrop for the rise of Minjung theology was the political dictatorship of General Park Chung-hee. Park seized power in South Korea with a coup in 1961. From 1961 to the 1980s, different dictators controlled the economic power of the country. In the meantime, Christian activists emerged and defied the authoritarian government's rule. Korean Christians organized different grassroots organizations such as the Korean Student Christian Federation. The National Council of Churches of Korea and the Catholic Church joined in the democracy movement.<sup>27</sup> They held prayer meetings, all-night vigils, fasting, and mass demonstrations. They called for reforms to end the autocratic regime and to call for a new democratic

23. Kim, *Public Sphere*, 17–18.

24. Kim, 116.

25. Kim, 110–111.

26. Kim, 117.

27. Yun-Shik Chang, *The Progressive Christian Church and Democracy in South Korea*, *Oxford Journal of Church and State* 40, no. 2 (1998): 438.

constitution. The church took advantage of its privileged position to continue the movement and never was timid with their position on this social issue.

The authoritarian government arrested religious leaders for their support of the democracy movement. The church suffered persecution from the government for decades. The church chose to be visible and influential. It refused to yield to the government's pressure to limit its activities to solely religious matters.<sup>28</sup> The authoritarian government used many tactics to deter the church. It monitored and harassed the church's activities, exerted economic pressures, expelled foreign missionaries, and prevented dissidents from getting visas to go abroad. Nevertheless, the church stood firm.

Some religious leaders supported the authoritarian government. Kim Jong-Pil, prime minister at the time, used the Bible to criticize church leaders for their political involvement, which he considered a worldly matter. Some held that Christians should just support and submit to their government.<sup>29</sup> Others organized groups to oppose any democratic movement effort and attributed the rising crime rate to the activists' protests. It was only in hindsight that they regretted such a position.<sup>30</sup> It took a long time to educate and build unity in the call for democracy.

The Christian activists received support from overseas Korean Christians and churches. Democratic Korean Christians formed different coalitions with overseas Christian organizations such as the Documentation Center for Action Group in Asia in Japan, the North America Coalition of Human Rights in New York, and the World Council of Churches to raise awareness of the oppression and to initiate changes.<sup>31</sup> Overseas Koreans formed groups to lobby international entities such as the United States Congress. Over the years, Christian activists were persistent in raising awareness of the condition in South Korea and pressured the government to change. These efforts also stimulated Christian groups in other countries and led to the social justice movement in South Korea.

Finally, in 1993, a genuine election took place to elect Kim Young Sam, the first civilian president in South Korea.<sup>32</sup> The free election marked the end of

authoritarian rulers in the country. The effort of the church in Korea to engage in these democratization efforts in these last few decades was crucial. Although the church had its many shortcomings, the church fulfilled its prophetic voice to call out the injustice and engage in political changes.

### War and Peace – A Case Study of the Church's Advocacy in the Iraq War

The Iraq War in 2003 was controversial. On 15 February 2003, massive demonstrations against the war happened in sixty different countries and 800 cities.<sup>33</sup> Millions of people participated in the protest, including many Christians. The United Nations' Security Council rejected the call to go to war. But in March 2003, the US and the United Kingdom decided to wage war against Iraq, claiming Iraqi possession of weapons of mass destruction.

Facing such a political dilemma, should the church get involved? How should it engage amid diverging and polarizing opinions, even among Christians? First, the church engaged in discourses, formal and informal. For example, Richard Neuhaus, the editor of *First Things*, a religious journal, was among the advocates to support the war, seeking to prevent more significant harm.<sup>34</sup> Others, such as those from the Mennonite tradition of nonviolence, opposed the conflict. Despite this difference in opinions, the church in their respective platforms engaged with the issue. Conducting discourse on the issue was an essential step of discernment, a necessary step to understand the reasoning behind different positions.

Second, different religious denominations put together documents and analysis arguments. About one year before the actual invasion of Iraq, the Archbishop's Council of the Church of England put out the document, *Evaluating the Threat of Military Action Against Iraq*, to oppose the war based upon an analysis of the just war theory.<sup>35</sup> Just war theory is an ethical theory used to determine whether a country can legitimately go into war. The analysis result was that there were options other than war. Moreover, it noted that the war option had a critical flaw in lacking a viable plan to rebuild the Iraqi government after the toppling of Saddam Hussein. The criticism proved

28. Chang, 444.

29. Chang, 456.

30. Chang, 440.

31. Misook Lee, "South Korea's Democratization Movement of the 1970s and 80s and Communicative Interaction in Transnational Ecumenical Networks," *International Journal of Korean History* 19, no. 2 (2004).

32. *South Korea – Timeline*, BBC News, May 1, 2008. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15292674>. Accessed on July 5, 2020.

33. Kim, *Public Sphere*, 158.

34. John Ydstie and Robert Siegel, "Issue of War with Iraq from Theological, Political and Military Perspectives," *All Things Considered*, USA: National Public Radio, 27 September 2002, <https://legacy.npr.org/programs/atc/transcripts/2002/sep/020927.siegel.html>. Accessed on July 5, 2020.

35. Kim, *Public Sphere*, 159.



insightful. Even today, in 2022, the US still struggles with the rebuilding of a new Iraqi government, leaving Iraq vulnerable to division and chaos, and hampering the task of rebuilding the country constructively.

Third, the church built coalitions to invite other churches and denominations to join in. The common language of human rights can be a useful tool for this coalition. Diverse groups, regardless of religious convictions, came together to argue against the impending war.

Fourth, the different groups within the church offered options other than war. They tried to analyze the situation and present other options, putting together documents such as *Disarm Iraq without War*. The World Council of Churches organized a Berlin conference on 5 February 2003, seeking to warn against the impending war. Even the Catholic Church joined in. Pope John Paul II made clear his opposition to military action in his address on 13 January 2003, saying "No to War!"<sup>36</sup> The churches tried but to no avail.

Years later, in retrospect, did the church do the right things? Did the church fail because it was unable to prevent the war? Sebastian Kim attributes the failure to the mistake in using the just war theory as it was too vague. The same theory can very well lead to different conclusions depending on how the arguments are arranged.<sup>37</sup> Although Kim's criticism of the just war theory has merits, there was no other theory available for discussion.

In addition to critiquing the use of just war theory, Kim also argues that the church lacked sufficient passion in opposing the war. He argues that the church's message was generally weak. "The Church was without sufficient courage, and the option plan was not sufficiently concrete," Kim criticized.<sup>38</sup> Kim's criticism might be a bit too harsh. The US and the UK were determined to go to war; no theory or public opinion could have altered their decision. The church did raise its prophetic voice and deliver the message in good faith.

When evaluating the effectiveness of public engagement, one should refrain from judging the effectiveness based on the immediate result. With a strong government, engagement takes a long time. The example of the democratic movement of South Korea should give hope to Christians and the church. Remain faithful, endure hardship, and be patient. If the church is faithful, God, as the sovereign lord of all, will bring justice at the end.

### A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

If we are convinced that it is the duty for the church to do public theology, the question remains: what would this mean in practice, especially as the social context of the church continues to evolve and change? We can make several observations that can help bring clarity.

First, technology has developed so rapidly that many options are now available to continue the effort to raise awareness. China has tried for decades to confine religious practice within church buildings through registration requirements, restrictive laws, and imprisonment. However, the newest generation of Chinese intellectual and elite Christians have defied such restrictions. These Christian intellectuals are referred to as the third generation of Chinese Christian intellectuals. They make excellent use of technologies such as Weibo, blogs, microblogs, and online and print magazines to discuss social issues.<sup>39</sup> The third generation of public theologians in China demonstrates that no authoritarian rule can stop freedom of thought and speech. South Korean churches' example attests to the importance of building a coalition with like-minded groups within and without, at home or abroad. These types of coalitions would be helpful in building consensus and bring about change.

Second, doing public theology requires a willingness to pay a price and to cultivate the character needed to endure. The Bible contains many narratives of authoritarian governments such as the Egyptian government during Moses's time and the Roman Empire during the early church period. Yet the Bible attests that oppression cannot suppress the people's voice. The pharisees did their best to silence the disciples about Jesus's resurrection and to stop his teaching from spreading. But the disciples did the opposite. The question is whether the church is willing to pay the price of obedient and faithful witness. Such willingness does not suddenly happen. It takes time to educate believers and nurture the character to endure. When the church is ready to suffer on this journey, the message can be delivered.

Violence risks the loss of witnessing. What is the role of using violence in the process of voicing one's concern? Violence can be useful in the short term to voice frustration. However, in the long run, violence is not preferred. That is why Jesus's ministry never resorted to violence (except the incidents at the temple). Reinhold Niebuhr, in his famous book, *Moral Man and Immoral*

36. Pope John Paul II, Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Diplomatic Corps 13 January 2003. [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2003/january/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20030113\\_diplomatic-corps.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2003/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20030113_diplomatic-corps.html). Accessed on July 5, 2020.

37. Kim, *Public Sphere*, 166–67.

38. Kim, 67–169.

39. Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 112.



*Society*, considers nonviolence a strategic tool.<sup>40</sup> Niebuhr rightly points out that violence tends to make the opposing side more stubborn. Because people would be so concerned about the effect of violence, they lose sight of the real issues. One should be beware of the blind spots of ideology. Violence might lead to the loss of a message in violence. Nonviolence, on the contrary, reduces the dangers of conflict to the minimum. It preserves moral, rational, and cooperative attitudes within an area of conflict and augments the moral forces without destroying them.<sup>41</sup> Gandhi of India and Martin Luther King Jr. of America are good examples of nonviolent social activists. Violence very easily distracts the discussion and gives opponents a foothold in their resistance to change. The church, as the messenger of moral vision, should be wise in its approach.

### CONCLUSION

God chose his people to be his channels and to convey his message to the world. The church, which includes all believers, continues to fulfill this priestly role in providing God's moral vision to the society. Public theology has a unique role as the means to guide and protect the moral quality of a society. When the wider society or the government go astray and lose their morality, history reminds us that Christians who live out their faith and engage their theological beliefs publicly can benefit their society. The relationship between the church and the greater society and state can be tense, especially when the social culture considers Christian morals and character offensive. The church and its members reflect the higher calling from God and serve as a check on the decline of social morality. The church collectively serves as a body to fulfill the mandate of God.

Nevertheless, this mandate requires the church to nurture and instruct believers and society of what the Lord has asked of them. Engaging both the social culture and governments requires engaging in dialogue with diverse groups, addressing public concerns, being open to scrutiny and criticism, developing a common language, seeking the common good, and risking all in being faithful to God's call in the prophetic voice. Although the church might be inadequate in fulfilling the challenges, its faithfulness is what God demands. The example of the church in South Korea gives hope that changes are possible

with perseverance and faithfulness. Although the church was unable to prevent the Iraq War, it changed public opinion toward the war. Despite any immediate setbacks, history has also repeatedly proved that the church succeeded in its role to bring about common good and human rights. Nevertheless, the judgment of its success might not be readily apparent. With the eschatological view, this hope of cultivating and keeping the creation order does not die.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Identify the cultural ethe that are threatening your society, such as individualism, consumerism, relativism, and nationalism. How do these cultural ethe affect morality of the people?
2. Can you think of examples of how Jesus engaged his cultures and participated in his community, socially, racially, and politically?
3. How can the church cultivate among Christians the passion to engage with culture and society?
4. Identify a particular social issue and discuss how the church can provide the moral norms to guide the society at large.
5. What are the personal and structural barriers to the practice of public theology? Identify ways to overcome these barriers.

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40. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man, and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1932), 251.

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## CHAPTER 11

# HOMOSEXUALITY IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ASIA

## The Case of Taiwan

*Shang-Jen Chen*

In the past decades, homosexuality has been one of the most controversial issues in Western societies as well as the church. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) social movements advocate for moral approval and LGBT peoples' rights. These social movements challenge the reproach of homosexual acts in the Bible and accuse the church of discrimination against LGBT minorities. These social movements have caused tremendous changes in legislation, cultural norms, and social practices in the West. They have also had an impact on some Asian societies and Asian churches. This chapter will explore different passages in the Bible which are essential to teachings regarding homosexual acts. Arguments in favor of homosexuality will be brought under scrutiny. In addition, since Taiwan is the first Asian country to provide legal recognition for homosexual partnerships, the current situation in Taiwan will be discussed. In the end, the chapter will provide a retrospection and prospection of the church in Taiwan.

## HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE BIBLE

Evangelical churches insist that the Bible is an essential resource for contemplating ethical issues. Church tradition, reason, and experience are also important, but they do not override the Bible's supremacy.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is essential to carefully read and interpret the passages which relate to homosexuality.

The Bible only has a few passages which directly relate to homosexuality. Unlike themes such as justice, care of the poor, respect of human life, which frequently and consistently appear in the Bible, texts which relate to homosexual

1. P. C. Lo, *Hei bai Fen Ming [Distinction between Black and White]* (Hong Kong: China Alliance Press, 1992), 230–31.

issues occur sporadically. In addition, the meaning of some of these verses is not as clear as we used to think. Therefore, we need to mindfully read these passages with particular attention to what they can teach Christians regarding homosexuality today. The verses which directly relate to homosexual themes are (a) Genesis 19:1–29, (b) Leviticus 18:22; 20:13, (c) 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; 1 Timothy 1:10; Acts 15:28–29, and (d) Romans 1:18–32.

### Genesis 19:1–29

The church has interpreted the story taking place in Sodom as being pertinent to homosexuality. The English word “sodomy,” meaning anal sex between men, is derived from the name of the city, Sodom. However, many contemporary biblical scholars indicate that the sin and crime of the story is gang-rape. Richard B. Hays says, “The gang-rape scenario exemplifies the wickedness of the city, but there is nothing in the passage pertinent to a judgment about the morality of consensual homosexual intercourse.”<sup>2</sup> Choon-Leong Seow states, “Rather, it is a story about wickedness in general, violence, and the violation of a sacrosanct code of hospitality. Gang rape is at issue in the passage, not same-sex love.”<sup>3</sup> Some other verses mention the wickedness of Sodom, including Isaiah 1:10 and 3:9; Jeremiah 23:14; Ezekiel 16:49; Matthew 10:12–15; and Luke 10:12–12. In these verses, the sins in view seem to be injustice, adultery, lying, pride, gluttony, excess wealth, indifference to the poor, and their inhospitality. None of these texts mention homosexuality. The only exception is Jude 7, “. . . Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion.” Even though this passage is concerning sexual immorality, it does not clearly state whether it is a heterosexual or homosexual act.

### Leviticus 18:22 & 20:13

Leviticus 18:22 states, “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.” Similarly, Leviticus 20:13 later reiterates the point, saying, “If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.” These two passages clearly and

directly address homosexual acts. The prohibition of the man–man homosexual act in Leviticus is unambiguous, and punishment is death. Clearly, the moral judgment on such acts is negative.

Reading these passages in context suggests that Leviticus 18 and 20 not only warn against such acts, but explicitly prohibit them. First, these passages categorize homosexual acts alongside other clearly prohibited behaviors such as adultery, incest, and bestiality. Second, God instructs the Israelites not to follow the immoral sexual practices of the gentiles, “You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices” (Lev 18:3). Third, the passages make clear that God has set apart the Israelites as chosen people, and that as a result, they must be holy because God is holy (Lev 19:2; 20:26). The prohibition of homosexual acts in Leviticus is the foundation for the subsequent repudiation of homosexual acts between men within Judaism.<sup>4</sup>

Some interpreters argue that the regulations of Leviticus 17–26 are part of the holiness code – an element of the Mosaic law that was abandoned by early Christians in light of the law’s fulfillment in Christ. The many distinctions related to ceremonially clean food and behavior was intended to highlight the Israelites’ unique status and identity. The Israelites were holy, and the gentiles were not.

Yet since the first century, Christians stopped complying with the holiness code of Leviticus, asserting that they need not follow the commandments regarding circumcision and kosher foods. Thus, some interpreters suggest that if Christians, the new Israelites, are not bound by the ritual codes of Leviticus, the prohibition of homosexual acts, a part of the holiness code in Leviticus, should be lifted at once.<sup>5</sup>

For evangelical Christians, this argument is not convincing. Most of the prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20 are clearly connected not only to ceremonial purity, but fundamental morality. The acts forbidden here – adultery, incest, bestiality – are seen as impure and unholy precisely because they are immoral. It is no surprise, as a result, that these acts continued to be deemed as immoral even in the New Testament. The apostles did not regard the Levitical prohibitions on sexuality to be analogous to the abolition of circumcision,

2. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 381.

3. Choon-Leong Seow, “A Heterosexual Perspective.” In Choon-Leong Seow ed. *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 14–27, 15.

4. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 381.

5. Yang-en Cheng and Tsong-sheng Tsan, ed. *Wo men he ju zhi you? Ji du xin yang yu tong zhi qun ti de hui yu* [What Do We Fear? The Encounter of Christian Belief and the Homosexual Community] (Hualian: Taiwan hao shi xie hui, 2019), 69.

which is clearly stated in Acts and Pauline epistles. Instead, the repudiation of homosexual acts occurs several times in the New Testament.

### 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 & 1 Timothy 1:10

Although gentile Christians do not comply with the ceremonial rituals and regulations of kosher food of the Old Testament, Hays insists that, “The early church did, in fact, consistently adopt the Old Testament’s teaching on matters of sexual morality, including homosexual acts.”<sup>6</sup> In 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, Paul gives a list of evil deeds; both of the lists include homosexual acts.

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6:9–10)

The NIV translation of “have sex with men” in verse nine actually translates two different words in Greek, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. *Malakoi* means being the passive partners – often young boys – in homosexual activity. *Arsenokoitai* refers generally to homosexual intercourse.<sup>7</sup> *Arsenokoitai* is also used in 1 Timothy 1:10. Robin Scroggs, a New Testament scholar, notes that the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, uses *arsenokoitai* in Leviticus 20:13. He suggests that Paul takes the word from Leviticus 20:13 of the Septuagint and uses it in 1 Timothy 1:10, indicating that Paul reaffirms the prohibitions of homosexual acts in the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> What concerns Paul here is not the ceremonial ritual of the Old Testament at all. It is the idolatry and immoral behaviors committed by the Corinthian Christians that worried Paul. He reminds the Corinthians that some of them had committed these sins and now since they are sanctified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (6:11), they should not continue in these acts. Homosexual acts are clearly one of the sinful behaviors in Paul’s list.

### Romans 1:18–32

This passage is the essential text in the New Testament to understand when we are seeking to explore the moral assessment of homosexual acts. Unlike 1 Corinthians 6:9 or 1 Timothy 1:10 which could be taken to suggest that homosexual acts are merely one vice in a list of evils, Romans 1:18–32 is an integrated passage setting out an important theological argument.

To understand what role homosexual acts play in the passage, we need to understand the main theme in Romans 1:18–32. Before this passage, in Romans 1:16–17 Paul presents a thesis regarding the gospel:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

In Romans 1:18–23 Paul articulates that the fall of human beings stems from the consequences of idolatry and sinful desires. That “women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones” and that “men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another” are given as examples to illustrate the sinful desires caused by the fall of human beings. In addition to unnatural homosexual acts, Paul provides a long series of wicked acts in Romans 1:29–31.

In chapter one of the book of Romans, Paul’s central subject is God’s creation of human beings and the world, human idolatry, God’s wrath, and the miserable consequences of sin. Although Christian sexual ethics is not the main theme here, Paul considers homosexual desires and acts offensive to God.

### Agreement between Old and New Testaments

After these passages are explored, one observation and one clarification need to be made. Although there are only some biblical texts that address homosexuality, they unanimously convey strong repudiation of homosexual acts. The attitude toward homosexuality in the New Testament agrees with the Old Testament. It is important to clarify that neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament says that homosexuality is the worst sin. When Leviticus 18:26 says, “The native-born and the foreigners residing among you must not do any of these detestable things,” these “detestable things” include all unethical sexual acts. Most of them are related to incest. As noted previously, in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 and 1 Timothy 1:10, Paul provides a list of wrongs,

6. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 382.

7. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 382.

8. Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 106–8.



and lists homosexual acts as just one among many. In Romans chapter one, homosexuality is given as the primary example to illustrate the miserable consequences of human rebellion to God, but Paul also mentions more than twenty other transgressions (vv. 29–31).

#### LIBERAL THEOLOGY ON HOMOSEXUALITY

Some liberal theologians argue for the approbation of homosexual acts, gay marriage, and ordination for practicing homosexual persons.<sup>9</sup> Although liberal theologians rightly indicate that the Bible's interpretation is closely correlated with church tradition, reason, and human experience, most liberal arguments do not give the same weight to the Bible as evangelical arguments do. Rather, liberal theologians who defend homosexuality tend to challenge the traditional interpretations of the related passages or even the Bible's authority, justifying homosexuality using four common reasons.<sup>10</sup>

First, according to the liberals' interpretation, the Bible does not repudiate homosexual acts. They say that the church has misunderstood these relevant passages for the last two thousand years and that this misunderstanding needs to be corrected now. The liberal interpretation of the passages in Leviticus is that the passages condemn prostitution and male-prostitution found in the temple cults of the pagan religion.<sup>11</sup> Liberal theologians cite Deuteronomy 23:18 when interpreting Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. In an analogous way, liberal theologians claim that the New Testament does not disallow homosexual acts and homosexual relationships between two adults. Rather, they state that what Paul cites as an example of human sinfulness in Romans is the exploitative relationship between men and young boys often seen in Greek culture in his time.<sup>12</sup> They insist that the relationship between men and young boys is unjust and, therefore, sinful because the relationship is exploitative. However, the exploitative relationship between young boys and men is different from the equal relationship between two consensual adults who "love" each other.

Second, the impact of feminist theology has played an essential role in the justification of homosexuality. Feminist theology has developed for more than a

half-century. It emphasizes that justice is the core value of Christianity, and that women are suppressed in patriarchal societies. Therefore, Christians must read and interpret the Bible from the eyes of the oppressed, and from the female perspective to counterbalance male bias. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a leading feminist theologian says, "Only when theology is on the side of the outcast and oppressed, as Jesus was, can it become incarnational and Christian. Christian theology, therefore, must be rooted in emancipatory praxis and solidarity."<sup>13</sup>

Feminist theology makes a significant contribution to drawing Christian attention to female roles in the Bible and church history, critiquing the injustice of the patriarchy of societies, in order to improve female social status, especially in the church. However, feminist theology goes far beyond that. Feminist theology insists that the experiences of oppressed women are essential for criticizing and challenging the authority of the Bible. Schüssler Fiorenza argues New Testament texts are to some extent, "androcentric codification of patriarchal power and ideology that cannot claim to be the revelatory Word of God."<sup>14</sup>

Some liberal theologians use the argument of patriarchal and androcentric ideology to justify homosexual relationships and acts. Using the feminist argument, liberal theologians claim that historically human societies have been hetero-hegemonic; therefore, people that are attracted to their same-sex are the minority and often misunderstood and oppressed. Since the Bible was written some two thousand years ago, liberal theologians argue that the authors would have no way of understanding same-sex relationships or their emotional and sexual needs. Liberal theologians thus believe that based on our contemporary understanding of social and behavioral science, homosexuals should be treated justly and equally. In addition, biblical scripture with patriarchal, male-centric, and hetero-hegemonic ideology should be reinterpreted.

The third reason, one of most common justifications of homosexuality, is that sexual orientation is genetic, not simply a life choice. People should not be admonished for their natural orientation and the acts induced by nature. However, "I was born this way" is an over-simplified and misleading argument in validating homosexuality. There are at least two points that need to be clarified. One is scientific; the other is theological. First, the American

9. Yang-en Cheng and Tsong-sheng Tsan, ed. *Wo men he ju zhi you? Ji du xin yang yu tong zhi quan ti de hui yu* [What Do We Fear? The Encounter of Christian Belief and the Homosexual Community] (Hualian: Taiwan hao shi xie hui), 2019.

10. L. Y. Kung, "Response to Lo C. P. in chapter 1," 25 and 27. C. F. Lo, and L. Y. Kung, *Tong Xing Lian de Shi xi Jian* [The Cross of the Homosexuality] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Christian Institute, 2013).

11. Yang-en Cheng and Tsong-sheng Tsan, ed., *What Do We Fear?*, 71.

12. Yang-en Cheng and Tsong-sheng Tsan, ed., *What Do We Fear?*, 97.

13. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation," *Theological Studies* 36, no. 4 (1975): 616.

14. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 32.

Psychiatric Association, which in 1973 ceased to list homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder, recognizes that "there are biological, psychological, social, and cultural influences at play in gender and sexual developmental trajectories. Social factors, such as family and peer relationships, robustly shape behavior during preschool and school-age years."<sup>15</sup> There is no conclusive evidence that genes determine homosexual orientation. Therefore, the claim that a person is born as homosexual has no scientific proof. Second, the Bible does not teach that human beings are the measure of all things. Neither does the Bible say that human beings take responsibility only when they have free will to choose. Since Adam's fall, human beings have had no choice but to sin against God. Human beings are slaves of sin (Rom 5:14; 6:16; 7:15). As Hays puts it, sin distorts perceptions of human beings in a corrupted world and overpowers the human will. The human inclination is to sin, not to do good.<sup>16</sup> The criteria of what is lawful and sinful for Christians is given as a revelation from God through the Scripture, not human reason nor inclinations. Sinful human inclinations do not justify human behaviors. Biblical standards and teachings from the Bible are true both for heterosexuals and homosexuals.

The fourth argument is that all human beings are sinners, whether heterosexual or homosexual. Therefore, the church should not admonish only homosexual acts. This argument intends to confuse and take focus away from the main point of the discussion. To clarify, it is important to point out that the church does not approve all kinds of heterosexual acts, but only consensual sex in marriage, which is between one man and one woman. This standard is given by scripture and has been recognized by the church. In the West, some liberal churches have gradually become more lax regarding compliance with the moral standards of Scripture. Evangelical churches consistently require ordained ministers to be faithful to their spouse if married or adopt a celibate lifestyle when single. The LGBT movement demands the recognition and blessing of same-sex marriage and the ordination of practicing homosexual persons. In a way, the LGBT movement asks the church to change the definition of marriage and overlook the moral criteria contained in the Bible.

### Avoiding the Bipolar Interpretations of Genders

While the pitfalls of LGBT theology must be recognized, the opposite extreme, namely an extreme form of complementarianism, should also be avoided. Some complementarians advocate a very conservative interpretation of genders, believing that women are to submit themselves to the leadership of men because it is the order ordained by God. They do not take into consideration the different examples shown in Scripture and the social and historical differences between the biblical ages and contemporary society. Although these complementarians proclaim that men and women are created with equal dignity, they insist on certain fixed gender expressions and a kind of patriarchy unjust to women, claiming that they stem from a God-ordained created order.

LGBT theology is on the other extreme, saying that all the gender differences are cultural constructions and open to continuous change. LGBT theology does not respect the theological understandings of the created order derived from Genesis 1 and 2. Namely, God creates men and women with biophysical differences and commends them to "be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth, and subdue it" (1: 28). Marriage is God's ordained institution in which heterosexual intercourse and procreation are blessed. Therefore, marriage, sexual acts, and procreation are interconnected for the welfare of individuals and the community. They ought not to be arbitrarily disjoined. Contrasted to the potentially procreative heterosexual act in a committed marriage, homosexual acts and relationships serve, at most, the satisfaction of individuals' sexual desire and the expression of mutual affection.

### THE LGBT MOVEMENT IN TAIWAN

Attitudes toward LGBT people and their homosexual acts have been influenced by religious, legal, social, political, and cultural heritage. Most Asian countries do not recognize same-sex marriage. Taiwan is the only exception. The secular government has generally tolerated homosexuality to varying degrees, while countries that have established Islam as their state religion prohibit homosexuality and impose penalties for homosexual acts.<sup>17</sup> The countries which culturally share the Confucian heritage, such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, traditionally disapprove of homosexuality. Still,

15. American Psychiatric Association website, <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency/education/best-practice-highlights/working-with-lgbtq-patients>.

16. Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 390.

17. Daniel Ottosson, *State-Sponsored Homophobia – A World Survey of Laws Prohibiting Same-Sex Activity Between Consenting Adults*, 2010 ILGA. [http://old.ilga.org/Statehomophobia/ILGA\\_State\\_Sponsored\\_Homophobia\\_2010.pdf](http://old.ilga.org/Statehomophobia/ILGA_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_2010.pdf).

people's attitudes toward homosexuality are constantly being challenged by the LGBT movement.

The evolution of legislature regarding homosexual acceptance can be categorized into five phases. The first phase is to remove the sodomy law that penalizes consensual same-sex sexual activity. Second, advocates for the LGBT movement push states to legitimize the so-called "gender equality educational law" and impose it on schools in order to eliminate any kind of gender discrimination. In the law, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgenders are considered gender minorities. All sorts of sexual inclinations should be treated as equal, and all kinds of sex between consensual adults should be protected by law. School teachers who express their opinions against "gender equality" are subject to prosecution with possible permanent deprivation of their teaching positions. LGBT advocates know very well that it is easier to indoctrinate school children with "progressive" moral ideas than change the attitudes of mature adults. Third, when school children indoctrinated by LGBT teachings grow old and have the right to vote, LGBT advocates think that they can then run for election so that they have the power to pass same-sex marriage laws in State Congress. Fourth, once same-sex marriage law has been passed, people become desensitized and are more inclined to grant adoption rights to same-sex couples. Fifth, when most of society does not oppose LGBT behaviors, LGBT advocates can champion the so-called anti-discrimination law to criminalize those who have different moral attitudes, speeches, and acts. Christian clergy and the church are often the targets of these anti-discrimination law.

A notable introductory point of the LGBT movement in Taiwan was the establishment of sexology, or sex studies, in universities in the 1990s. Sexology is the study of human sexuality, including human sexual interests, behaviors, sexual orientation, gender identity, and atypical sexual interests. To protect freedom of speech and academic studies, professors of sexology advocated for sexual liberation, de-stigmatization of sex workers, legalization of the sex industry, LGBT rights, etc., though these issues were seen as morally controversial by the public. These advocates try to influence the thoughts of the younger generation through education, publishing journals and books, holding international and domestic symposia, public speaking, and mobilizing social movements.<sup>18</sup>

Since 2001, the LGBT Pride Parades have been held annually in Taipei and other major cities in Taiwan. The parades gathered more and more of the

young generation to uphold the LGBT rights. In 2004, the Gender Equity Education Act was promoted. This Act was promoted to "advance genuine gender equality, eliminate gender discrimination, safeguard human dignity, and soundly establish education resources and environments that epitomized gender equality."<sup>19</sup> The Act defines "gender identity" as an individual's awareness and acceptance of their particular gender category. In practice, it includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, etc. Those who provide negative commentary on gender traits, sexual orientation, and gender identity are seen as sexual bullies or engaging in harassment and are subject to removal from teaching positions. In a way, the Act secures the legitimacy of the LGBT ideology in educational institutes of all levels. It silences schoolteachers who have oppositional opinions. The LGBT ideology has been indoctrinated in students fully. Ironically, most parents are not aware of the impact this Act has on their children.<sup>20</sup>

Some Christian scholars have responded to the LGBT movement and argued that the moral value of the same-sex relationship is not equivalent to the moral value of the husband-wife relationship; therefore, homosexual union ought not to be seen as marriage. In 2006, *Solitude*, a Taiwanese Christian journal, published a special issue to describe the case against the legalization of homosexual union. It contained articles by theologians, philosophers, and legal scholars.<sup>21</sup>

The moral concept of natural law was used as an argument to make the case against LGBT unions to the public. Monogamy has attained its status as the primary marital institution in major civilizations because it provides a structure that may fulfill three basic human needs. They are (1) sexual satisfaction, (2) a long-term, intimate, and stable emotional bond between a couple, and (3) an ideal environment for raising children. Homosexual acts and relationships are not able to contribute to the society by procreation which is an essential common good of marriage. Therefore, the homosexual relationship does not have equal moral value to the husband-and-wife relationship.<sup>22</sup>

19. <https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=H0080067>.

20. Zhang Wenhang, "Zheng shi xing ping jiao yu de zheng yi yu kun jing" [An Investigation to the Controversies and Dilemmas of Gender Equity Education] in Daowei, Wang et al., *Dang Ye Su yu Jian Tong Zhi* [When Jesus Meets Homosexuality], (Taipei: Zhen na da, 2020), 170–98.

21. Immanuel Chih-Ming Ke, editor-in-Chief, "Solitude – A Meditative Journal of Taiwan Christian Thought," *Theology of Sex, Love, and Marriage*, no. 12, Special Issue Dec (2008).

22. Shang-Jen Chen, "A Moral Evaluation of Homosexual Acts," *Journal of Life Education* 3, no. 1 June (2011): 67–91.

18. <http://sex.ncu.edu.tw/history/index.html>.

The natural law argument was not well received by the public for three reasons. First, the public paid little attention to Christian scholars. Second, the public was not familiar with the moral concept of natural law. Third, the younger members of Taiwanese society have lower marriage and fertility rates and are less sympathetic to the emphasis on procreation. In 2005, the total fertility rate in Taiwan was 1.1 children per woman over a lifetime on average. Taiwan has had among the lowest fertility rate in births per woman among the world since 2005.<sup>23</sup> The majority of younger people do not recognize that there is a direct connection between marriage and procreation.

In 2011, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan included LGBT education and “the variety of sexual desires” in the guidelines of gender equality education for the primary and high school students. Textbooks of gender equality education were edited accordingly.<sup>25</sup> Through quoting and posting the controversial contents found in school textbooks, a group of Christian parents and schoolteachers intended to raise public awareness and appeal to the Ministry of Education. The authors of the textbooks sued the six Christians for slander for criticizing textbook contents. Up to this event, the church and Christians had only slowly started to realize the rapidly changing legislation and ethos of the younger generation on LGBT issues.

The Taiwan Alliance to Promote Civil Partnership Rights drafted three bills of diversified family formation in 2012. The draft bills aimed to allow same-sex marriage, legal recognition of cohabitation without sexual fidelity to partners, and a multiple-person family system.<sup>26</sup> Some legislators upheld the draft bills and brought them to be discussed in the second readings in the Legislative Yuan. At this critical moment, the church and people who held conventional family values, joined together to hold a huge demonstration to oppose the draft bills at the end of 2013. The protest had approximately 300,000 people. Thus, the legislators laid the controversial draft bills aside.

Although the opponents set back the LGBT legislation, the proponents simultaneously took another route. Two gay partners asked the Constitutional Courts for interpretation of marriage laws. They claimed that the Civil Code

provisions on the family that do not allow same-sex marriage violate Article 7 and Article 22 of the Constitution. Article 7 guarantees the people's right to equality. Article 22 guarantees the people's right to marry. The 24 May 2017 Court Constitutional ruling, *Interpretation No. 748*, declared that family provisions which do not allow same-sex partners to create a permanent union of intimate and exclusive nature for the committed purpose of managing a life together are a gross legislative flaw. In addition, they concluded that the current provisions of the Civil Code violate the right to marriage and the rights of equality. Therefore, the Legislative Yuan decided that it shall amend or enact new laws following the ruling of the interpretation within two years.<sup>27</sup> The ruling of the Interpretation of the Constitutional Court has equal status to the Constitution. That means people's opinions and the representatives of the Legislative Yuan cannot overwrite the ruling. Thus, the LGBT movement won a decisive war through the Interpretation of the Constitutional Court.

The church and the conventionalists did not give up on their efforts to defend the traditional values of the family. They proposed three clauses to be voted directly by the people in the referendum and the legislators and mayoral elections of 2018. Clause 10 insisted that the Civil Code should define “marriage” as the union between one man and one woman. Same-sex union should not be defined using the word marriage. Clause 11 opposed the Ministry of Education implementing the *Enforcement Rules of the Gender Equity Education Act* in primary and middle schools. Clause 12 responded to the ruling of *Interpretation No. 748* of the Constitutional Court. Clause 12 insisted that same-sex union is to be enacted as a new law and not as an amendment to existing provisions regarding the family in the Civil Code. These clauses were attempts to preserve the traditional understanding of the family and marriage prescribed in the Civil Code. These three referendum clauses had seventy-two percent, sixty-seven percent, and sixty-one percent of the valid ballots and the referendum was passed.<sup>28</sup> The referendum results expressed that the Constitutional Court opposed the opinions of the majority in Taiwan regarding same-sex marriage.

Nevertheless, referendum results do not confer power to challenge interpretations of Constitutional Court rulings. As a result of the decade long struggle between progressive and conventional groups, the *Act for Implementation of Interpretation No. 748* passed in May 2019. “Two persons of the same-sex may

23. National Development Council, Taiwan, <https://pop-proj.ndc.gov.tw/dataSearch2.aspx?r=2&cuid=21048&pid=59>.

24. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1112676/taiwan-total-fertility-rate/>.

25. The Ministry of Education of Taiwan, *Ren shi tong zhi: jiao you xi yuan shou ce* [To Know Homosexuals: A Handbook of Educational Resource] (Taipei: The Ministry of Education of Taiwan, 2008).

26. <https://tapcpr.org/english/about-us>.

27. <https://cons.judicial.gov.tw/jcc/en-us/jep03/show?expno=748>.

28. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018\\_Taiwanese\\_referendum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018_Taiwanese_referendum).



form a permanent union of intimate and exclusive nature for the purpose of living a common life." Although same-sex union is not marriage de jure, the obligations and rights between same-sex couples are almost the same as married couple de facto, except same-sex couples have no right to adopt children.<sup>29</sup>

### THE PASTORAL DILEMMA

Generally speaking, most congregations in Taiwan have been friendly to all kinds of people, including divorcees, the remarried, addicts, and people with homosexual orientation. However, the enthusiasm to evangelize to the marginalized and disadvantaged varies from church to church. The churches preach that God's salvation is for all and all need to repent and accept God's redemption, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, marital status, gender, and sexual orientation. However, those who fear reproach by Christian teachings may either hide their identities or shy away from Christian communities.

Taiwan's LGBT movement, the ruling of the *Interpretation* of the Constitutional Court in favor of homosexual union, and the referendum voting against the legalization of gay marriage intensified the tension between the two sides. Meanwhile, the position of pastors and church members on the homosexual issues became more public. Congregational conflicts also sporadically occur. LGBT congregants feel more pressure. Some of them choose to leave Christian communities, even though their pastors and church members do not push the issue.

The evangelical churches in Taiwan hold positions that are similar to their allies in the West. The churches stress that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith (Rom 1:16). The power of God will eventually liberate all from the oppression of sin, sexual or other.<sup>30</sup>

In 2013, more than 100 congregations and around 10,000 Christians in Hong Kong declared a joint declaration, *Walking Together in True Love*, which encouraged pastoral care for gay Christians while rejecting same-sex relationships. It states that "we encourage churches to care for and pastor those struggling with same-sex orientation with gentleness and patience." It "encourages churches to establish a respectful atmosphere and a safe environment, to teach brothers and sisters to be accepting to those struggling with same-sex orientation." The declaration also makes clear that "we believe that believers

who continue to engage in same-sex activity, and refuse to pursue a holy life, are not walking in truth."<sup>31</sup> In 2014, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, the denomination which has had the widest diversity of opinions on homosexuality, also promulgated a *Pastoral Letter on Homosexual Marriage Issue* signed by the moderator and general secretary.<sup>32</sup>

Only a few independent churches in Taiwan unambivalently state their revisionist position that God gives alternative sexual orientations. In these churches, people are to make peace with God and continue in their way of life. These churches emphasize God's unconditional love and Christian inclusiveness. Sin is not understood in terms of individual behaviors such as homosexual activity, but oppression and social injustice.

### RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT FOR THE CHURCH IN TAIWAN

After the *Act for Implementation of Interpretation No. 748* was enacted, the church leaders of the Evangelical wing reviewed why Christians and those who oppose same-sex marriage were unsuccessful in blocking legislation that approved it.

The reasons can be divided into two categories. The first set of factors is theological, while the other is structural. First, the theological factors. Most evangelical churches and Christians in Taiwan pay more attention to internal affairs of the church and neglect social issues. They care about church growth and church-planting much more than policies related to school education and law-making. Many Christian parents who had elementary and middle school aged children were not aware that their children, since 2004, had been indoctrinated by the Gender Education Act. The result of the Gender Education Act's implementation is that the younger generation overwhelmingly believes that homosexual orientation is as normal as heterosexual orientation, and that same-sex marriage is a characteristic of a liberal and progressive society.

In evangelical churches, congregations view pastors as the opinion leaders and speakers of the churches, but because of the narrow vision of pastors, this made sensible recognition of social changes and discussion on political issues nearly impossible. Therefore, most evangelical churches in Taiwan have not paid attention to, and expressed criticism about, education policy, law-making, and social issues.

29. <https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=B0000008>.

30. Thomas W. Gillespie, "The Pastoral Dilemma," 113–122, 121, in Choon-Leong Seow ed. *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

31. [http://www.sexculture.org.hk/b5\\_press\\_details.php?press\\_id=24](http://www.sexculture.org.hk/b5_press_details.php?press_id=24).

32. [http://www.pct.org.tw/ab\\_doc.aspx?DocID=118](http://www.pct.org.tw/ab_doc.aspx?DocID=118).

Some very conservative Christians are very reluctant to openly discuss homosexual and same-sex marriage issues because they do not want to “mix religion and politics.” They consider that “separation of church and state principle” means Christians should not bring faith into the public square. Even though they strongly oppose same-sex marriage and believe it is immoral, they still think that Christians should not be involved in social advocacy or openly oppose the Act. The other reason that makes evangelical churches hesitant to react to the LGBT movement is that theologians and pastors in the evangelical wing have little skills and tools to engage in public discussion on homosexual issues due to their negligence of public theology. Most evangelical theologians and pastors are only experienced in communicating exclusively to Christians. They do not know how to debate homosexual issues using non-Christian language in public. All they know is that it is morally wrong according to biblical teaching. While the LGBT advocates proclaim that homosexuals have equal rights to marriage and that same-sex marriage is a human right, and that assertions against these rights are discrimination, very few Christians who are professionals in ethics, law, and politics dare to publicly challenge these human rights discourses. This phenomenon shows that even Christian professionals are not prepared to defend Christian convictions on man–woman marriage in the secular world, and that pastors do not make effective use of Christian professionals.

Aside from theological factors, structural factors must be considered as well. Evangelical churches in Taiwan are loosely organized. They belong to a couple of dozen denominations, and there is no national council of churches. Even though these churches generally oppose same-sex marriage, it is not easy for them to unite to form a campaign. The first organization supporting the LGBT movement was formed in 2000.<sup>33</sup> Christian organizations to oppose same-sex marriage were not formed until the 2010s. They were ten years behind.

Since evangelical churches rarely paid attention to social, political, and legislative issues in the past, they were not familiar with social advocacy. The only exception is one mainline church that has experience in democratic and social justice movements in Taiwan. However, this particular denomination had no consensus on issues related to homosexuality, so they were not able

to assist the church to oppose the legislation of same-sex marriage. In general, evangelical churches did not know how to formulate advocacy goals and objectives. In the 2010s, the evangelical church gradually realized that they needed to form associations, mobilize people, and identify allies to counter the LGBT movement. However, the learning pace was not fast enough to catch up with the lost time.

Evangelical organizations have little experience working with the decision-making bodies, such as the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Justice. Evangelical organizations had lobbied legislators, but the results were not satisfactory. Most of the media were sympathetic to the LGBT movement. Their positions made media reports one-sided and unfair to the conventional campaign.

The LGBT movement, on the contrary, has been strategically flexible. Advocates of the LGBT movement are social activists and often involved in other social movements that plead on behalf of the socially disadvantaged minorities, such as laborers, the physically disadvantaged, and victims of environmental pollution. They allied together and eventually many socially disadvantaged minorities became important comrades in the LGBT movement.

### WHAT CAN THE CHURCH LEARN FROM THIS SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT?

Christians can learn several key lessons from close observation of these events. First, to counter the LGBT movement and the legislation for same-sex marriage, evangelical churches gradually united together in the late 2010s. They realized that the church needs to be united to be a witness to society. Second, evangelical churches realized that they did not understand or care enough for people with same-sex attraction. In general, in fact, evangelical churches did not care enough for society's socially disadvantaged minorities. Third, some evangelical churches reconsidered their stance on the principle of separation of church and state. They became more attentive to social, legislative, and social issues while they did not lose their passion for spreading the gospel. For example, in 2015 a new website funded by evangelical churches, Kairos, came into being. Its mission is to make effective use of the internet and to promote traditional family values.<sup>34</sup> Unlike much previous Christian media, its target viewers are the public, especially those who are concerned with children's education, parenting, and marital relationships. Fourth, churches and

33. Taiwan LGBTQ+ Hotline Association was the first organization in Taiwan to support the LGBTQ people and to mobilize them to the LGBT movements. It was established in 2000. <https://hotline.org.tw/aboutus>.

34. <https://kairos.news/5726>.

Christian parents began paying more attention to primary and middle school education. Last, but not least, Christians were shocked when *Interpretation No. 748* of the Constitutional Court was announced. They eventually realized that the Christian worldview is very different from the worldview of secular society. The differences are most evident in the realms of sex, marriage, and family. Christian values are usually not in accord with the values and laws of secular society.

Although legislation supporting homosexual unions has passed, the culture war does not end there. LGBT activists are advocating for the right to adopt children, artificial reproduction, and surrogate pregnancy for the LGBT couples. The churches in a secular and liberal society encounter perpetual challenges and they need to discern how to respond.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does your church have any roles or positions that are restricted to men? Such as pastors, elders, deacons? What are the theological explanations behind these restrictions?
2. Has your church ever discussed homosexual issues? Is there anyone who challenges the biblical teachings on homosexual acts in Romans 1:18–32? Are you able to defend the positions that you hold?
3. Does your church provide the congregation with theological perspectives to evaluate different social movements (such as the environmental protection movement, labor movement, or LGBT movement)?
4. Do the Christian denominations in your country have an organization to bind them together, such as a national council of churches? If they have, what kind of social witness do they provide to society?
5. Does your church communicate their Christian viewpoints of some social issues to the public in a way that non-Christians understand? Could you give an example and assess its effectiveness in communicating with non-Christians?

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